DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 108 793 RC 008 598

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TITLE How to Expand Learning Opportunities in Small School Districts.
INSTITUTION Northwest Regional Educational Lab., Portland, Oreg.
PUB DATE 19 Apr 75
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the National School Board Association Convention, Miami Beach, Florida, April 19, 1975

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Change; Ancillary Services; *Change Strategies; Communication Skills; Community Consultants; *Community Involvement; Decision Making Skills; *Educational Development; Educational Planning; Guides; Models; *Rural Areas; *Small Schools; Speeches
IDENTIFIERS REP; *Rural Education Program

ABSTRACT

Based on the proposition that shared decision making affords greater opportunity for the support, commitment, and motivation necessary to achieve improved learning situations in small communities, the Rural Education Program (REP) of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory has developed a planning model to aid small rural school districts. Central to development of REP strategy (Rural Futures Development Strategy) are the following assumptions: (1) school improvements are longer lasting and more effective if those affected take part in the decision making process; (2) a comprehensive plan produces enduring improvements; (3) improvement of community communication, problem solving, and decision making skills increases the likelihood of positive action, local leadership, and group motivation; (4) a "process" person (outside consultant) facilitates group work and enhances the potential for reaching goals; (5) group projection of a desirable future is a better 1st step than identification of problems and concerns; (6) consultative assistance (facilitation) is more positive when it builds independence rather than dependence. Based on these principles, REP resource materials, training plans, and products include guides for schools, school board development, school-community groups, the training of process facilitators, etc. (JC)

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1975 NSBA CONVENTION/MIAMI BEACH, APRIL 19-22, 1975
SPEAKER Jongeward CLINIC NO. A-14 PROGRAM Q.27

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HOW TO EXPAND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN SMALL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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RC008598

A paper presented at the National School Board Association Convention April 19, 1975
Miami Beach, Florida

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HOW TO EXPAND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SMALL SCHOOLS

I. A FUTURE VIEW

Come with me in my heliocopter and take a ride into the future. It's April 1985. My heliocopter hovers over a small community in one of our rural areas. Not only has my heliocopter been able to speed ahead in time, but I have acquired several unique abilities: I can see, hear, and sense what is happening in the community below.

As we hover, I notice something different about this rural community. No school stands on the hill separating the business and residential sections of town. In fact, I don't see any building that resembles a school. Down on my right, however, I see a rural transit bus loading both small school age children and senior citizens. As they walk out of a nearby building, I overhear a conversation between a youngster and one of the grey-haired adults. They are talking about the lunch tney have eaten together at the Community Center. The youngster is talking excitedly about a story in his reading lesson. Obviously the senior citizen has spent some time in the Community Center with this second grader reading and discussing today's lesson. Now they board a bus and return to their separate homes.

I look out the left window of my heliocopter and see a small cluster of buildings with a flag waving overhead. I can easily read the words on the sign out front: "Human Services

Center: Community Health, Safety, Welfare." Because of my unique ability to know what is happening inside, I realize that students are being immunized against cancer at the Community Health Center. Public Health doctors and nurses are being assisted by high school and community college students from health science and careers classes. Across the hall, in the Social Security offices, I see student assistants helping with clerical tasks, data processing and interviewing. These students are from three educational levels: high school, community college and university. Each one is engaged in a learning task appropriate to his or her level of performance. The department supervisor is a "social worker-teacher," capable of performing "office" tasks and helping "facilitate" students' learning of new skills and content.

In a larger building to the right I see an assortment of motor vehicles in various states of disrepair. There are smashed police cars, dump trucks without engines, passenger cars, road graders, scrapers, carryalls, and others. Girls and boys, men and women in mechanics' uniforms work under, in, and around these vehicles. Small groups form here and there to discuss the job at hand. A glass-enclosed room nearby houses what looks like a combination library and parts store for cars and trucks. Reference manuals for all these vehicles line the shelves along one side of the room. "Open stacks" on the other side contain carefully numbered and lettered new parts needed to repair the assembled vehicles.

This is the State, County and Community Road and Maintenance Shop--combined under one roof with the community college and high school automotive and mechanical departments. Here students from vocational and career education courses learn marketable skills while repairing and servicing public vehicles in the motor pool.

A gust of wind lifts my heliocopter and we drift a few hundred yards to the west. Below, I see another complex of small garden plots, rows of nursery stock, a few greenhouses scattered about, and people of all ages busy with various tasks. A sign on one building reads "U.S. Department of Agriculture: County Extension Office." Underneath, to my surprise, are the words "Supervising and Cooperating Fully With Vocational and Career Education Classes from Community College and the High School."

This is exciting! I am eager to see more! The combined public and school library is just ahead, so we move to get a better view. As we do so, we recognize the strains of "The Star Spangled Banner." From my heliocopter I see through the roof of the community auditorium, where a small group of about 40 musicians--young people and adults--are gathered. This is the Community Band, leading the opening ceremonies for a group of visitors. The next moment, the Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners is addressing the group. I hear him say:

> "You've been our guests for these past two days and have seen our Community Services and Educational Centers. Several of you have been asking us, 'How were you able to do it? How did you get all these

federal, state and local governmental agencies, the community college, the school district and the members of the local community together to provide this unusual educational and service Center?'

"My answer is: with a great deal of difficulty and much persistence. But, more seriously, I'd like to say that it wasn't easy! It has taken a lot of hard work! Ten years ago or more, our county commissioners realized that our community was going to change whether we liked it or not. More people were coming, houses were being built, we needed more roads, people wanted more services, and more schools were planned. We knew that we were not a rich area and so we began to wonder how we might afford all these things. As elected officials, we recognized that many community people had ideas to offer and, wanting to be re-elected, we decided to involve those people. We did! It was our best move! I think the first meeting we had was with the local school board, superintendent and the community college president from our area. Later the group expanded to include federal and state agency representatives, local business people and several representative citizens and became involved in regional land use planning and community development activities.

After more details of their early involvements, successes and disappointments, he realizes he is taking too much time, and concludes by noting several factors that he feels guided their planning and work:

"1. We liked our community! It was a good place to live, raise our children. We agreed we wanted to keep it that way.

"2. After much discussion we recognized that we needed to "plan a future".....one we liked..... one on which we could agree and would be willing to work toward.

"3. We realized that available public monies could not possibly cover all the needs we foresaw. Alternatives must be found to help us attain our "desirable future" while staying within a stable--if not declining--tax base, using available energy resources.

"Our local school board and administration helped us in those early days by suggesting some important guidelines for education in our community. Andy here is Chairman of our School Board. I've asked him to tell you what some of those items were. Andy Higgins, would you please tell these visitors about them?"

(I see Andy rise to address the audience):

"The board, the superintendent and staff members met on several occasions. Out of their discussions emerged three or four points important to our future plans:

"(1) We wanted to break down that old traditional barrier that separates school from community, and make the two one unit.

"(2) We agreed that learning should be real and practical. As the teachers put it, 'Learning should satisfy student needs in a real-life environment.'

"(3) Since citizens pay taxes to support schools, and students use what the school provides, we wanted both groups to have an opportunity to influence the educational decisions that affected them.

"(4) We recognized that any change in one part of our school system affects the rest of the system, and we agreed, therefore, that we wouldn't make any more 'piecemeal' changes.

"Well, John, there were others, but those were important ones."

At this point the county commissioner chairman returns to add some final comments:

"There are two more important factors that I want to share with you. These are:

"1. One of the hardest things for us to accept was our need for outside help to accomplish our goals. We finally saw how restricted we were by our own ideas--how unwilling we were to look at alternatives. An outside "facilitator" from a regional service agency helped guide us through our problem solving, decision making and communication processes and taught us how to cooperate (collaborate) with other agencies and institutions. This facilitator helped agencies become much more responsive to the specific needs of our community.

"2. Perhaps one of the main principles that has guided us through these last ten years has been viewing every activity from the perspective of multiple use. We have tried to get rid of the idea that every public service must build its own empire. This has been a complicated task. We have tried to explore each human, social, and recreational service and each public facility to discover its educational value and potential. We wanted career education to become relevant for the students and adults of our community."

The county commissioner is continuing, but our heliocopter has only a limited supply of methane gas, and we must return to the refinery at a local garbage disposal plant to refuel.

II. WHAT TO DO TODAY

We have returned from our 1985 trip. It is April 1975 once again and we are in Miami Beach at the NSBA Convention. It would be very appropriate for you as school board members or superintendents to ask, "How can we use these ideas to help expand learning opportunities in our small districts?" Here are some basic steps:

1. Help members of your school-community begin to consider what they would view as a "desirable future."

   If possible, find a third party outside the community who is qualified to help you do this.

2. Try to involve the entire community--students (especially from junior and senior high) and staff, custodians, secretaries, bus drivers, aides, community people--so that all voices can be heard.

3. Organize a broadly representative "mix" of these people to form a School-Community Group.

   This group must be sponsored by the school board but should act as an independent body (a third party problem solving group) that makes carefully prepared recommendations to the Board. Encourage and support this group.

4. When the group is established, ask them to examine the goals of their "desirable future" and determine which have priority.

   Then, ask them to list the barriers that prevent your school-community from reaching the goals they've listed as priorities.

5. Next, the group must examine available alternatives that can help them remove these barriers.

   Get them to identify what things are most important. Involve the whole community if possible. Responsive agencies are most helpful at this point of the search.

6. When one or more alternatives have been selected, the group should make a written recommendation to the board explaining their thinking and their conclusions up to this point.

7. Members of the board/administration study the report, accept or modify it as needed, and ask the group to develop final plans for initiating the recommendation.

   Involving the community group in implementation of the plan maintains their identification with and support of it. As school board members, share with them the responsibility for making it work!

8. In compliance with the boards request, the group should develop a plan for implementing the recommendation, and bring it back to the board for final approval.

   It is especially helpful if the group includes in their plan indicators (criteria) that can be used to assess the relative success of the newly installed program/project.

9. The School-Community Group helps install the new program, monitors it, and, after a few months, assesses the progress it has made.

   It is tempting at this point to let the professionals take over. Keeping the community group participating, however, builds confidence and support.

If the group has been successful, many will wish to tackle a new goal priority. Encourage them. At the same time, thank those who do not wish to continue, and find others to serve in their places.

This process means sharing old responsibilities in new ways. You must recognize that professional educators and the board have traditionally attempted to carry this entire burden. The approach I've described suggests that school board members and administrators share some decision making authority with students, staff and the community. The school administrator becomes a local "facilitator" of what the whole community decides is good and/or desirable. While shared decision making may be cumbersome, it offers great opportunity for support, commitment and motivation in achieving improved learning opportunities for all community members.

III. DREAMS VS. REALITIES

Now you may say, "That all sounds great--but would such a process really work?" The answer is yes, it does work--not equally well in all communities, but well enough to warrant continued optimism.

During the past several years, the Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon, has--under development contract with the National Institute of Education--been developing this planning model to help small districts expand learning opportunities.

At the Lab, we examined the experiences of many groups who have attempted educational change in rural areas. We also studied research and development literature on change and innovation to determine what kind of improvements have enough community support to continue beyond the initial surge of interest.

While our findings were not startling, we uncovered some fundamental ideas:

1. School improvements were longer lasting and more effective when those people affected by decisions had an opportunity to influence them.
2. A comprehensive plan or total system that included all affected elements produced longer lasting improvements.

3. Helping people improve their communication, problem solving and decision making skills within the context of real situations increased the likelihood that (a) positive action would result, (b) local leadership would emerge from within the group, and (c) the group would be motivated to continue.
4. Having a "process" person facilitate the group's work enhanced the potential for reaching goals. Ideally this person would come from "outside" the immediate community, from an organization like a BOCES or IED, capable of supporting him/her in a "helping role."
5. Helping a group project a "desirable future" is a better first step in planning than listing all their problems or concerns. A harvest of concerns tends to polarize members of a group, while projecting a "desirable future" tends to bring members together.
6. Consultative assistance (facilitation) is more positive when it builds independence rather than dependence. The goal of the outside consultant (facilitator) is to work him/herself out of a job.

These and other basic assumptions and principles guide the development of REP resource materials, training plans and products at NWREL. We call the total system in which these products are developed and tested the Rural Futures Development Strategy--RFD. You may be interested to know that RFD products include:

1. A Notebook for School-Community Groups which provides information, guidelines, and resources to school-community members as they participate in the RFD Strategy--particularly as they consider local educational needs and prepare recommendations for meeting those needs.
2. A Guide for School Board Development which provides school boards information, guidelines, and resources to support their participation in the RFD Strategy--particularly as they respond to the recommendations of local people and the needs of their clients (school staff and students).
3. A Guide for Schools which provides school staff members information, guidelines, and resources to help them work with the SCG on educational improvements, and deal with issues related to organizational development, curriculum development, personal/professional development and leadership.
4. Strategy Descriptions which provide all participants clear, substantive overviews of the RFD Strategy. The descriptions range from a brief brochure to a detailed technical paper.
5. Process Facilitator Manuals which provide process facilitators information, guidelines and resources to assist them in helping others participate in the RFD Strategy.

6. A Guide for Training Process Facilitators which provides information, guidelines, and resources that agency personnel can use in training process facilitators and field consultants.
7. Support Agency Materials which support and guide participating personnel in regional and state department of education offices.

These products are presently undergoing exploratory testing in San Juan County, Utah (Four Corners area, with the State Department of Education, the Navajo Nation and several other involved groups). With continued funding from NIE, we plan to use the results of these tests to refine present products for use in another Northwest site. Dissemination to other interested states and communities will follow.

IV. CONCLUSION

Perhaps this approach to expanding learning opportunities was different from what you anticipated. I chose this method to illustrate the generalized set of procedures we have been developing and using: a planned change model for rural schools and communities. We are excited about the results, and believe the model holds much promise for expanding learning opportunities in small school districts.

Thank you for your attention. I will be happy to respond to your questions.